



GRESHAM COLLEGE
Founded 1597

Liverpool and the slave trade Transcript

Date: Monday, 19 March 2007 - 12:00AM



LIVERPOOL AND THE SLAVE TRADE

Anthony Tibbles

Liverpool is often called the 'capital of the slave trade' - I want to examine what this means and to look at the operation of the slave trade. By understanding the detailed operation of the trade we can also see how Liverpool became so important as a slaving port and what it meant for the development of the town and its prosperity.

We know a lot about the operation of the trade because a surprising number of documents survive from the period. These include not only account books, but letters to suppliers, letters between owners and captains, captains and owners, owners and agents, indeed a whole wealth of detailed information. Whilst communication in the 18th century was slower than it is today, those in trade were extremely well informed and had connections throughout the world in which they dealt. For instance, Captain Lawson was instructed 'You will be careful to write to us by every opportunity.' I will use the papers of William Davenport, a Liverpool merchant as my principal guide to how the slave trade operated, supplemented by other contemporary sources.

Although Sir John Hawkins and a few others, including Sir Francis Drake, made about a dozen slaving voyages to Africa in the early years of Queen Elizabeth's reign, Britain did not enter the slave trade until the 1650s, some 200 years after it had begun. The impetus to do so was the acquisition of colonies in the West Indies, and particularly Jamaica which was seized from the Spanish in 1655. The developing sugar plantations required a huge labour force and already the use of enslaved Africans was well established. Initially slaving was strictly controlled and a monopoly company, the Royal African Company, was created by Charles II, with his brother, the Duke of York and future King James II, heavily involved. But the company's monopoly was unpopular, particularly with merchants in Bristol who successfully lobbied for its removal in 1698.

Whilst Bristol's merchants were quick to seize the new opportunities, their counterparts in Liverpool were relatively slow. The first 25 years of the new century saw Liverpool send 77 ships to Africa, whilst Bristol sent nearly 400 and London nearly 700. However from the 1730s Liverpool merchants began sending increasing numbers of ships to Africa and by 1750 they were sending more than Bristol and London put together. Whilst both these latter ports continued to participate, from this period onwards Liverpool dominated the trade in enslaved Africans until abolition in 1807. Indeed, Liverpool's share continued to increase and in the last decade or so of the trade, the port was responsible for 80% of all British voyages and some 40% of all European voyages.

During the course of the period 1700 to 1807, Liverpool was responsible for half the British trade which meant that her ships carried approximately 1.5 million Africans into enslavement, more than a tenth of all Africans who were transported over more than four centuries. So the title, capital of the slave trade is not an exaggeration.

The organisation of a trade on this scale was necessarily complex and each individual voyage required a high level of planning and management. I want to take us through this process and show how the merchants of Liverpool managed the trade. I will use the voyage of the *Essex* as the starting off point but use other voyages as examples, demonstrating also why Liverpool was so successful at this trade and why the port and her merchants came to dominate it.

The *Essex* was managed by William Davenport on behalf of himself and six other investors in the voyage. Davenport was one of the most active slaving merchants in Liverpool and was responsible for some 140 voyages during a course of his working life spanning four decades.

This arrangement of sharing the investment in a voyage was one long practised by merchants trading abroad in any trade. The risk of losing a ship was a severe blow but if shared could usually be coped with. It was better to invest in say six voyages with five other people than each invest everything in a single voyage. Although the profit was shared, so also was the risk. Each voyage was made up of 64 shares and investors would often have between 6 and 8 shares but it could be smaller. Often the captain of the voyage was a small shareholder - giving him a personal interest in the outcome! Peter Potter, Captain of the *Essex*, for instance was the third largest shareholder in the ship in 1783.

In the weeks and months leading up to the departure of a ship, Davenport was gathering his cargo of trade goods. These would come from local, national and international suppliers. The main type of goods on any voyage almost always comprised textiles - but each merchant gathered a wide range of different cloths from a variety of sources. Some of the names of these cloths are no longer familiar - romalls, Brunswick - but others such as cambrics, fustians, and chintz are more familiar. One of Liverpool's prime sources was Manchester and the Lancashire towns and so-called Manchester cloths were a regular feature of the cargo. But there was also a need to include more exotic materials, especially the silks and chintzes which were manufactured in India. Some cloths were known by their destination - the Angola cloths carried on board the *Enterprise* in 1794.

Other important goods were glass beads. These were generally imported from Italy, usually through the port of Livorno of the west coast of Italy. Davenport worked closely with the firm of Thomas and William Earle, who invested in many of his slaving voyages, but also traded extensively with the Mediterranean and brought back many of his cargoes of beads. But he was also buying beads from Silesia in Germany and also on occasions he bought beads from Prague, via contacts in Amsterdam.

During the 1770s beads made up between a quarter and a half of the value of all the cargoes shipped by William Davenport to the Cameroons. He also supplied other traders and in the period 1766-1770 he sold beads worth £39,000 (over £1.5m today).

Another cargo which came from even further afield was cowry shells. These came from the Maldives Islands in the Indian Ocean and were acquired generally through London and Amsterdam. Cowries were popular in Africa where they were used as a form of currency but were also used as decoration on clothing and other items as a reflection of wealth and status. In 1781, Davenport heard that one of his suppliers had recently received a cargo of 10 tons of cowries and he wrote to them that he was willing to buy any that were left. Within days he had ordered 360 bags at a cost of £689 (£35,000 today).

Other foreign produced goods included trade knives from the Netherlands and guns from Denmark.

Within England, goods came from different parts of the country. Birmingham supplied guns - known as trade guns. Reinhold Rucker Angerstein, a Swedish visitor to England in the mid-1750s, commented 'The ones manufactured in Birmingham with English iron as raw material are considered to be rather unreliable and only suitable for the Guinea trade.' But in the course of the 18th century, some 20 million guns were exported to Africa and not unnaturally contributed significantly to the turmoil there.

Closer at hand, copper and brass were supplied in the form of manillas (horse-shoe shaped rods of metal) in places like Wigan, Cheadle, Warrington and Holywell in North Wales. Angerstein visiting the hammer and rolling mill in Holywell remarks 'The copper used is smelted by Mr Patten's works in Warrington... neither the hammer or the rolling mill were in operation because the workers were busy drawing down copper to rods for the Guinea trade... The Negroes of Guinea use the rods as ornaments and wind them around arms and legs. Forty tons of copper a year are worked up at this mill, mostly for the Guinea trade.'

Another important commodity was alcohol, such as brandy, which came from local distilleries, and also rum, which had often been produced in the West Indies.

As perhaps can be seen from the origin of many of these goods, Liverpool was well placed geographically to obtain them. Use had always been made of the river system to transport goods but the rapidly increasing canal system augmented this significantly. Liverpool thus had easy access not only by the Mersey and Weaver but the Leeds-Liverpool Canal, the Sankey canal and the Trent and Mersey. For instance, Davenport instructed that his bags of cowries should be delivered 'by the canal to Liverpool, the same as the Bellona cowries'.

This easy access to the goods that were required for trading in Africa was undoubtedly one of the reasons for Liverpool's success. But also of crucial importance was knowledge of what would sell in Africa and also what would sell on which parts of the African coast. Merchants increasingly prepared a cargo to sell specifically on one part of the coast, knowing what was required and what was fashionable. One comes across such phrases 'a choice cargo... very suitable for' or 'specially chosen for' time and time again in the instructions. Potter's instructions begin 'we have shipped a well assorted cargo for the Windward Coast of Africa...'.

Another Liverpool captain David Tuohy is told to go to Grand Bassa 'your cargo being calculated for that purpose.'

We know that Africans were very particular about some of the goods and the merchants also knew this very well. Davenport is forced to write to one of his supplies that they have sent the wrong item

'the photals are not the proper pattern and by no means will suit us, the kind we want must be colours mostly red, on blue ground with red and blue stripes as they were for Old Callabar and you must well know this pattern.'

And the sons of the Duc de Rochefoucauld learnt in Leicester that the majority of the stockings produced there were sent to Spain and Africa.

'They are all different: for the last market, their quality is coarser: they are blue, with large white or yellow clocks representing two flowers. Mr Peares assured us that if they weren't precisely to this pattern they wouldn't sell.'

This came from experience but also from contacts with individuals in Africa. An African agent, Egboyoung Offeong, wrote from Old Calabar in 1783

'... we want more iron bar and romalls [cloth] and powder and ordnance and shot as them be the finest thing for our trade... Send round white and round green and round yellow beads...'

As the cargo was being gathered, so were the crew. The most important person was the captain - indeed the outcome of the voyage and its profitability depended on the experience and skill of its master. This was recognised at the time and was one of the reasons why Liverpool ships were more successful at places like Bonny where knowledge of the trade and the skills of negotiation were crucial. After the Dolben Act all captains had to have served as chief mate or surgeon on two voyages or three as a mate to qualify for appointment. The average age on appointment was 30, and very few were under 25. Most captains

made fewer than 4 voyages - they recognised the dangers - about 25% of them died, mostly on the African coast.

The Captain was supported by his officers - a chief mate, a second, third and often fourth mate. Many ships also carried a surgeon, and maybe an assistant, to look after the enslaved Africans. This became increasingly common and was required legally after the Dolben Act of 1788. The average age of surgeons was 26. Every year two thirds of the surgeons entering the trade were first-timers and 1 in 3 died - probably because they were exposed to serious diseases for the first time.

Other important positions included the carpenter who generally spent the voyage out to Africa building the accommodation for the enslaved in the holds. Some vessels also had an armourer who looked after the guns and other weaponry, both to protect the crew from their cargo but also privateers and enemy ships in time of war. A cook, steward and cooper were also employed and often one or more boys, making their first voyage to sea.

A number of vessels also had Africans on board as members of the crew. Peter Potter had Adam Jema, a young black boy. Intriguing Captain James Irving had three 'Portuguese Blacks' when he left Liverpool for Africa.

Crew frequently deserted either on the African coast or once they had arrived in the Caribbean and found alternative work and voyages to return home. Peter Potter was able to recruit two seamen to replace some of those who died. John Smale took four obviously experienced Africans on board the *Hawke* - Cudjoe, Quashey, Liverpool and Joe Dick, all 'Fantye men.' The payment included 'gold advanced you on the African coast', clothing, brandy and cash paid during the voyage and on arrival in Liverpool. They were paid the same wages as their white counter-parts.

At the outset of the voyage, the captain was presented with a letter of instruction from his owners setting out exactly what he was required to do - where he was to trade in Africa, what cargo he was expected to acquire, the terms of trading, and then where he was to take his cargo, the agents and places where he should deal and what he should bring back on the final leg of the voyage.

William Davenport wrote to Peter Potter on 5 June 1783...

As you are appointed Commr of our new ship the Essex on board such we have shipped a well assorted cargo for the Windward Coast of Africa... barter your cargo for prime young slaves none less than 4 feet 4 in high... [and] ivory...

If you should find the Windwd Coast glutted with ships and the prices high, and a probability of lying long there, we recommend you to lay out that part of your cargo adapted for this part of the Coast, and such as will not be suitable for Gaboon, and purchase about 150 negroes, and proceed to Gaboon to dispose of the rest of the cargo for good slaves, ivory and wax...to stay on Windward coast if trade brisk and can get away in 4 - 5 months... A few presents to the traders now and then will not be lost, and will promote your trade and quick dispatch which is the life of an African voyage, for lying long on the Coast brings distemper into your ship and often proves very fatal in the end...

The pressure on the captain was substantial both in terms of the voyage itself, looking after the ship dealing with the weather, the crew and all the other myriad of demands. But he also had the owners constantly looking over his shoulder - if not physically then at the back of his mind. John Smale, who had already made 4 voyages as captain when he took the *Hawke* to Africa in 1779, was told so in his letter of instruction in no uncertain terms by Davenport.

'From your many years of experience in this trade we doubt not your making a profitable use of it and giving us entire satisfaction, and as this River has had very little Trade for sometime past, we are of opinion you might break with them on very low terms both for slaves and ivory and hope you will be able to purchase three hundred and fifty of the former and six tons of the latter, and as you'll have no Competitors you'll have an opportunity of purchasing the very best of both, we make not the least doubt of your spinning out the Cargoe to the very utmost of our interest, for when you consider the Premium of Insurance, high Wages & most extravagant outfits, nothing but a low Purchase, good Markets and the greatest economy abroad can bring any profit to the concern'

On arriving on the coast, the process of trading began. Most Liverpool ships dealt directly with merchants and agents on the coast of Africa, rather than trading at the European forts, such as Cape Castle or Elmina. In this form of trading, it was usual to pay the equivalent of customs and to give presents and gifts to the local traders and elders in advance of trading itself beginning. As Davenport wrote to Peter Potter 'a few presents to the Traders now & then will not be lost, & will promote your trade,... Another regular practised system was for the captain to offer a sample of goods he had on board in exchange for a given number of slaves, known as 'pawns'.

Here is Davenport writing to Peter Comerbatch in 1781

'On your arrival in the River you are to send your boat on shore for pawns, and having recd them from whom you know are good you ay then go on shore to the Dukes, and agree with them to trade on the same footing that Capn Begg did last voyage - the particular of which you have in his trust and trade book'

This later reference is intriguing suggested that some captains maintained records of their dealings on the coast and perhaps helping to explain how the details were reported back to their owners in Liverpool.

The process of negotiating for a cargo was, however, a very slow one. At its best, only small numbers of Africans were bought each day. The log of the Juverna shows this in action.

Oct 4 th	Anchored off King Peter's Town, in the Cameroon river, ship Ranger also in port
Oct 6 th	King Bell came on board
Oct 9 th	Purchased 1 female slave this day
Oct 11 th	Several natives employed building a house over the quarter deck. 4 slaves on board.
Oct 12 th	Returned the 4 slaves and purchased 1 female slave.
Oct 17 th	Purchased 2 female slaves
Oct 21 st	Received on board 1 male slave, 2 females, total on board 7
Oct 23 rd	Sent Intrepid's boat up to Calabar, fired 16 guns for King Bell
Oct 27 th	Received on board 1 male slave.

Oct 28 th	Received on board 1 male and 1 female, total on board 10
Oct 29 th	Received on board 1 male and 1 female, total 12
Nov 1 st	Received on board 1 male slave, total 13
Nov 2 nd	1 slave sick.
Nov 3 rd	Received 50 billets of wood
Nov 4 th	Received on board 1 male slave, total 14
Nov 5 th	Received 2 male slaves on board, total 16
Nov 7 th	Received 1 male slave on board, total 17
Nov 8 th	Received 2 male and 1 female slave on board, total 20

So after more than a month, the vessel has only 20 enslaved Africans on board.

Trade was often even slower. There could be delays caused by other competing traders. Peter Potter wrote to Davenport:

'Also here is Captain Wise with a Cargo far superior to mine as he can give two Indea Bafts upon a Slave whereas I can only give one Manchester which is a great detriment to my Trade'

Two months later he wrote to Davenport again, this time from Young Sisters further along the coast, when he had 290 Africans on board but

'I shall fall far short of my purchases, as the prices are very high and provisions very scarce and of course very dear...'

Just over a month later Potter left the coast bound for Grenada.

If matters were often difficult dealing with Africans, the same is also true of many of the English agents on the coast. The Company of Merchants Trading to Africa ran a fort at Anomabu about ten miles from the more famous Cape Coast Castle in present-day Ghana. Here it was possible to purchase larger numbers of enslaved Africans at one time but it was not without its hazards.

Captain David Tuohy of the Sally was warned by his owners:

When you are arrive at Annamabo, we would have you lay yourself out for as quick despatch as possible, consulting Mr Richard Brew of that place to whom you have a letter of recommendation. But we recommend to you to be very carefull what

connexions you have with Mr Brew in trade and do not deliver him one ounce of goods until you get the slaves on board, that you agree with him, as we are given to understand many captains have been duped by him and detained a considerable time on the coast, to the greatest detriment of their voyage, owing to his not fulfilling his agreement with them in a reasonable time; but we hope this will not be your case.

Everyone recognised the dangers of staying for a prolonged period on the African coast principally because of the dangers of sickness and disease both to the cargo and the crew. As Davenport warned Peter Potter - by lying long on the coast brings distemper into your ship, and often proves very fatal in the End. This was prophetic because on his next voyage Potter wrote to Davenport from the African coast that he had 18 slaves on board 'but have had the misfortune to bury 20 slaves.' On his second voyage, John Newton recorded

'This day buried a fine woman slave, No.11, having been ailing some time... She was taken with a lethal disorder which they seldom recover from.' He took action - 'Scraped the rooms, then smoked the ship with tar, tobacco and brimstone for 2 hours, afterwards washed with vinegar.'

But the crew also suffered and there were few effective remedies against tropical diseases. (In fact, the high death toll - Clarkson calculated 20% of seafarers died on the African coast - was one of the most potent arguments against the trade.) On the voyage of the *Essex* under Peter Potter, eight seamen died between 29 October and 6 December 1783, including two of the officers, the second and third mates. And this from a compliment of 33.

Owen Roberts, an ordinary seaman who wrote a brief journal of more than forty years at sea, wrote of his second voyage:

'We lay so long on the coast in consequence of a dispute between the traders and the Captain, that we almost starved to death for want of provisions and a great many of the crew died.'

There were also other problems - the crew were often difficult to manage. Newton had more than his fair share of problems in this respect but had remedies to hand. A crewman stealing brandy was 'given a smart dozen' and when one of the crew attacked one of his fellows with a hammer Newton had him put 'in hand cuffs and stapled him down to the deck.' On more than one occasion, Newton transferred a troublesome member of the crew to a passing Royal Navy ship, always on the look out to recruit crew, and where discipline was brutally enforced.

Often it took several months to get a full cargo and once full, the voyage across the Atlantic began - known as the middle passage. It normally took 6-8 weeks but on occasions took longer.

Life on board for the Africans was appalling. The men were held in shackles and chains, separately from the women and children. John Newton writing thirty years after he left the trade wrote

'the slaves lie in two rows, one above the other, on each side of the ship, close to each other, like books on a shelf. I have known them so close, that the shelf would not easily contain one more... the poor creatures thus cramped for want of room, are likewise in irons, for the most part both hands and feet, two together, which makes it difficult for them to turn or move, or to attempt to rise or to lie down, without hurting themselves or each other...'

He sounds like an independent commentator but in fact at the time he was in complete charge of the arrangements and there

is no evidence he did anything to ease matters. Indeed, as we shall hear, he was harsh captain.

The enslaved were only allowed up on deck to exercise in good weather and under strict supervision. They were fed twice a day, usually on a stew made of beans and or yams and they were also allowed bread and water. Luke Mann was instructed by his owners: 'You must not give your slaves too much provisions; they are accustomed to low diet in their own country.' John Newton, on one of his voyages, cut out hot meals towards the end of the voyage because he was going over budget 'Give the slaves bread now for their breakfast for cannot afford them 2 hot meals per day.'

Spending virtually all their time in cramped and unhealthy conditions, disease frequently took further toll on the Africans and crew alike. Peter Potter lost 48 Africans to disease from a cargo of 330 on his voyage in the *Essex* - almost 15%.

The worst incident we know of was aboard the Zong, when Captain Luke Collingwood had many sick Africans and thought they would die. He told the crew they were running out of water and over a three day period he ordered 132 slaves to be thrown overboard. His logic was that if they died from starvation his owners could not claim insurance but they could if the enslaved died from 'perils of the sea'. The insurers disputed the claim and it led to a court case - but the insurers lost - and despite the efforts of Olaudah Equiano and Granville Sharp to have a case brought for murder, this was thrown out. The irony is that the vessel arrived in Jamaica with 420 gallons of water - plenty for all.

The enslaved were literally treated as cargo - their only defence being that they were valuable, but that did not stop the officers and crew treating them with brutality and disregard. Women were often raped by officers and crew - Newton later wrote

'When the women and girls are taken on board a ship, naked, trembling, terrified... They are often exposed to the wanton rudeness of white savages... Resistance or refusal would be utterly in vain.'

He was perhaps thinking of William Cooney on board the African in 1753 who 'seduced a woman slave down into the room and lay with her brutelike in view of the whole quarter deck for which I put him in irons.' But often the enslaved were seen as the offenders and they were punished violently for any perceived misdemeanours.

It is no wonder that the enslaved Africans attempted to resist. It is perhaps not surprising that 10 of the Africans on the Zong in fact committed suicide by jumping overboard rather than being thrown. Equiano in his autobiography speaks of his horror at being taken on board a slave ship

'When I was carried on board... I was now persuaded that I had gotten into a world of bad spirits, and that they were going to kill me... I was then put under the decks, and there I received such a salutation in my nostrils as I had never experienced in my life... I now wished for the last friend, Death, to relieve me.'

It is no wonder many other Africans attempted suicide.

The enslaved also organised on board revolts and we now know that there was an attempted revolt on 1 in 10 voyages. We do

not know of any successful ones - the crew had a strong arsenal of weapons and in any attempted resistance was put down violently. There was a continual atmosphere of uncertain on board a slaving vessel. As John Newton reported this was 'to intimidate the slaves.'

It did not work and less than a month after writing this Newton discovered

'that the slaves were forming a plot for an insurrection. Surprized 2 of them attempting to take off their irons, and upon further search in their rooms, upon the information of 3 of the boys, found some knives, stones, shot etc and a cold chisel. Upon enquiry there appear 8 principally concerned to move in projecting the mischief and 4 boys in supplying them with the above instruments. Put the boys in irons and slightly in the thumbscrews to urge them to a full confession.'

Yet a few weeks later, Newton discovered another potential rising '...punished them with the thumb screws and afterwards put them in neck yokes.'

As the vessel approached its destination, the enslaved Africans were prepared for sale. As Newton records 'Wash'd the slaves with fresh water and rubbed them with Bees wax and Florence oil'. Another method involved having 'their skins dressed over three or four times with a compound of gunpowder, lime juice and oil.'

Most British ships took enslaved Africans to the British colonies in the West Indies, though a small number went to the Carolinas, Virginia and other areas of North America. Over the course of the 18th century, 70% of the Liverpool-based voyages were to Jamaica, the jewel of the colonies and the most prosperous. But there were also significant problems in Jamaica, because of the harshness of the conditions. Many Africans died within two or three years of arriving and a significant number ran away from the plantations to live in independent Maroon communities. New areas of the island, particularly in the west, were being developed for cultivation. There was thus a constant demand for labour and thus a constant demand for slaves.

Captains were given detailed instructions of which islands they were to take their cargo and usually the names of the agents with whom they should deal and on what terms. John Smale was told to head for Antigua and to get £32 a head for his cargo, otherwise he was to proceed to Old Harbour, Jamaica.

But captains also had some discretion. Although Peter Potter had been instructed to go to Grenada or the Carolinas, on 30 May 1784 he wrote to Davenport from St Vincent's where he had already sold the majority of his cargo

'Receiving intelligence from the Grenades I found the markets were not so good there as here and as to going to Carolina it required at least four weeks provisions and water, firewood etc which I was quite out with; and provisions here are very dear besides the loss of time and I had a great many small slaves which would not have suited the Carolina Market'

He concluded 'I thought it best for the good of all concerned to go no further.'

Having sold their cargo, there were generally two options - to await a cargo of tropical goods or to return home as quickly as

possible.

On 30 May 1784 Peter Potter was in Grenada 'in great hopes of getting a freight home' and was able to write by 12 June

'I have bought 35 hogsheads of sugar... and have already engaged 80 hogsheads of sugar and 150 bags of cotton besides 10 or 12 casks of coffee. I expect to be to sail from here the 1st or 2nd of July...'

In fact he left on 15 July and Baille and Hamilton, the agents in Grenada wrote to Davenport, informing that Potter had departed 'in your ship *Essex* with a full loading of sugar and cotton...'

He arrived back in the Mersey on 28 August 1784 some 13 months after he had set out.

But often the owners preferred the vessel to get home as quickly as possible, especially in times of war or during the growing season. Seizure was a real threat. Seaman Owen Roberts was captured by French privateers on three separate occasions in the Caribbean. On one occasion his vessel was seized off Jamaica with a cargo of 440 enslaved Africans and carried to Guadeloupe 'where I suffered imprisonment and lost all I had.'

John Smale of the *Hawke* was given instructions to obtain bills for each of the owners personally. He was to leave his cargo of ivory bought in Africa with an agent 'to be shipped by the first vessel of Force that proceeds with Convoy to this port'. He was also instructed to sell 'all the water casks you can spare' and for the ship 'to proceed home by the first Convoy with as few People as possible, as it will ease your wages which are extravagantly high.'

However, there was generally a sense of relief for the return voyage. Problems might still arise, particularly from weather, and also from enemy action, particularly by the French. A number of ships were lost on the return voyage but this was a peril of crossing the Atlantic, indeed for any deep-sea voyage in a sail ship at this period. Any captain and his crew would have been pleased to see the approaches to the Mersey and the owners would be equally relieved. William Young was instructed by Thomas Leyland

'On your return to this Port hoist white flags at your fore and main top gallant mast heads, which will be answered at the light house on a pole to the southward of the house...'

The merchants in Liverpool could see this answering signal from the lighthouse at Bidston and thus had early warning of the vessel's approach. This was no doubt greeted with great relief.

So why did Liverpool merchants and seafarers participate in this odious and difficult trade for so long? The answer is that it was profitable. Economic historians still debate over the profitability of the slave trade and how far ports like Liverpool benefited. Was it the foundation stone on which the town built its wealth? As a drunken actor, George Cooke, was being booed off stage in Liverpool in 1772, he cried out 'I have not come here to be insulted by a set of wretches, there is not a brick in your dirty town but what is cemented with the blood of a negro.'

The town council writing to the Earl of Egremont, one of the Secretaries of State, in 1762, claimed

'That the West-Indian and African trade is by far the largest branch of the great and extensive commerce of this town.'

'That this is the most beneficial commerce, not only to themselves, but to the whole kingdom, as the export is chiefly of the manufactures of the kingdom, British ships and seamen solely employed, and the returns made in the produce of the colonies belonging to Great Britain.'

Recent work suggests that between a third and a half of Liverpool's trade from 1750 to 1807 was to Africa and the West Indies, dealing in enslaved people or the goods they produced. Indeed, it has recently been suggested that at least 40% of Liverpool's wealth at this time derived from slave related activities.

The level of involvement is surely the clearest evidence that it was a profitable trade - and the fact that participation increased in the final years is indicative that the merchant community were keen to gain as much benefit from the trade as they could before it was abolished.

Research on some of the papers of William Davenport suggest that he was getting an average return of 8% on his investments in the 1770s and 1780s but we know that some voyages were spectacularly successful. Two voyages of the *Hawke*, captain by John Smale in 1779 and 1780 yielded profits of 73% and 149%. Clearly Smale had taken Davenport's injunction to 'make profitable use' of his cargo to heart and he surely fulfilled the terms of 'giving us entire satisfaction.'

Thomas Leyland and Thomas Molyneux were equally successful with the voyage of the *Enterprize* in 1794. They received the proceeds of the sale of 356 Africans which amounted to £22,000. From this they had paid out just over £12,000 in costs (agents' commission £3000, the cost of the cargo £4500, outfitting and other costs £2500, wages £1300, costs on the voyage £950), so their profit was nearly £10,000 (£550,000 today) - again not far off 100%.

The benefits were more widely spread and also permeated to every level of society and everyone who was involved from ship builders, outfitters such as sail makers and rope makers, the bankers and insurers, suppliers of the trade goods, the importers of the slave produced tropical goods and even those who consumed them. Indeed, the trade was interwoven within the whole economy - which makes quantifying the exact benefit it provided extremely difficult.

The captains and officers also profited substantially from their endeavours. Captain Tuohy was told

'You are to have £5 per month wages and four per cent on every 104 or the gross sales for your Coast Commission with 2 per cent on the Gross sales (exclusive of 12 slaves to be picked out)... for your privilege. Your chief mate Mr Mathew Flanagan is to have £4 per month wages, and one free privilege slave... Your second mate, Mr Jona N Kewley, is to have £4 per month wages, and one free privilege slave... Your doctor Mr John McMullen is to have £4 per month wages and one free privilege slave...'

The commission and the sale of the privilege slaves could be a considerable sum, worth far more than the wages the captains and officers received. John Newton earned £247 and £257 in 'guinea commission and privilege' on two of his voyages, the equivalent of two years' wages on each occasion (£12-15,000 today). A surgeon could earn perhaps £100-150 in wages and commission, sufficient to set him up in private practice and many surgeons seemed to have made only one voyage for this purpose and also recognising the higher risk attached to their position.

It was not the same for everyone. The average seaman was paid about 30 shillings a month and did not receive any bonuses. Seaman Owen Roberts, who made 16 voyages to Africa during his 40 years at sea, wrote in old age

'I am now grown old, infirm, and almost blind, my right arm being much disabled from my shoulder to the finger ends. I have been so often taken by the French that poverty and infirmity has fallen to my lot. I must have been born under an unlucky planet...'

So how did Liverpool and its seafaring community react to the campaign to abolish the slave trade? Not unnaturally, it was widely opposed in the town. One of Wilberforce's most vociferous opponents in Parliament was Banastre Tarleton, a member of one of Liverpool's leading families. His grandfather, father and three brothers were amongst the most active slave traders in the town. When Thomas Clarkson, the abolitionists' redoubtable researcher visited the town to collect evidence against the trade, he was almost pushed into one of the docks by an angry crowd and nearly drowned.

The Reverend Raymond Harris (nom de plume of a Spanish Jesuit émigré, Raimondo Hormoza) wrote a pamphlet entitled '*Scriptural Researches on the licitness of the Slave Trade*' which provided biblical support for the trade. He promptly received a £100 from the Town Council.

Others were also officially rewarded. In 1790 Parliament instituted an enquiry into the slave trade and a number of Liverpool traders spoke in favour of continuing the trade. One of the most experienced captains was James Penny (who gave his name to the famous Penny Lane). He painted a very rosy picture of life on board ship:

'If the weather is sultry and there appears the least Perspiration upon their Skins, when they come up on Deck, there are Two Men attending with Cloths to rub them perfectly dry, and another to give them a little Cordial... They are supplied with Pipes and Tobacco... they are amused with Instruments of Music peculiar to their own country.. and when tired of Music and Dancing, they then go onto Games of Chance.'

Penny conveniently forgets the level of coercion. He received a magnificent piece of silver table ware, worth £100, (now in the Maritime Museum and destined for the new International Slavery Museum). But along with four other witnesses, he was also granted the freedom of the borough 'for the very essential advantage derived to the trade of Liverpool from their evidence in support of the African slave trade and for the public spirit they have manifested on this occasion...'.

Not surprisingly, there were fewer abolitionists in Liverpool and few willing to declare their views. In 1788 the list of subscribers to the Society for abolition included just 8 Liverpudlians, including William Roscoe and Quakers William Rathbone and his son. They were all members of the elite and were circumspect in their opposition, one of their number even remaining anonymous. The most outspoken critic of the trade was Edward Rushton, known as the blind poet, who had lost his sight from disease on the African coast and who had direct experience of the trade. Unusually, he did not indulge in racist preconceptions and had a strong commitment to the ideals of liberty for all human beings.

However, more than anyone else Liverpudlians knew the difficulties of the trade and of the resistance of the Africans themselves. The fact that the town elected the pro-abolitionist Roscoe alongside an anti-abolitionist MP to Parliament in 1806 may have been read by some that even Liverpool was recognising that the trade would inevitably come to an end. This may explain Wilberforce's remark that Roscoe's vote was worth 40 others.

But Liverpool's involvement with the slave trade did not come to an end in 1807. There were a few illegal slaving voyages and as late as 1860 an American vessel, the *Nightingale*, which had been fitted out with a cargo in Liverpool, was caught slaving off the coast of Angola.

However, more importantly, Liverpool continued to trade along two sides of the triangle - to Africa and to the Americas, and indeed these trades grew dramatically in the following decades. Using trading connections developed during the slave trade, Liverpool came to dominate the trade with West Africa for more than a century - particularly in palm oil, which was often produced by enslaved labour.

But more especially, Liverpool became the main importer of American and Brazilian cotton, which for more than half a century after abolition was produced on plantations reliant on enslaved labour. Indeed, 'King Cotton' was the economic backbone of both the rapidly expanding and prosperous towns of Liverpool and Manchester. By 1886 Liverpool had more millionaires than any other British city outside London.

But links with the slave trade itself also flourished, though more covertly. One of the biggest new markets for Liverpool in the early 19th century was Brazil. Merchants from Liverpool, and elsewhere, supplied what were called 'coastal goods' - but many of these goods ended up on the African coast buying enslaved Africans to transport to Brazil. It might be argued that the original shippers did not know where the goods would end up but even today we are familiar with such supply chains.

So a relationship between Liverpool and the institution of slavery, which began in such a small way, helped transform the town into the major city it has become today. Liverpool as European Capital of Culture in 2008 owes no small debt to its role as Liverpool Capital of the Slave Trade.

©Anthony Tibbles, Gresham College, 19 March 2007